



NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

September 4, 2018

The Honorable John Hoeven
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
838 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing on Native Language Revitalization

Dear Chairman Hoeven:

On behalf of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), I respectfully submit the following written comments in response to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs' oversight hearing titled "Examining Efforts to Maintain and Revitalize Native Languages for Future Generations." NIEA is the nation's largest and most inclusive organization advocating for comprehensive culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

FEDERAL TRUST RESPONSIBILITY

Congress has a federal trust responsibility for the education of Native students. Established through treaties, federal law, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the federal government's trust responsibility to tribes includes the obligation to provide parity in access and equal resources to all American Indian and Alaska Native students, regardless of where they attend school. Resources and funding to preserve and revitalize Native languages are a critical part of the federal trust responsibility, an obligation shared between the Congress and the Administration for federally-recognized tribes.

NATIVE LANGUAGES AND CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Native languages are at the heart of Native identity, interwoven into ceremony, tradition, and history of tribes and Native communities. When Native languages are integrated into and celebrated in the classroom, Native students are more likely to be engaged and succeed. Language preservation and revitalization programs are critical to ensuring that Native students have equitable access to culturally relevant educational opportunities.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 74 Native languages are on track to disappear within the next decade, and only 20 Native languages will be spoken by 2050 without immediate action. Tribes and Native communities are innovating to develop unique schools that pass Native languages to future generations through a rigorous academic program. However, resources and funding for such programs remain a challenge for many communities. Congress should strengthen and expand resources to support Native language revitalization, maintenance, and preservation to ensure equity in education for Native students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Native languages and culturally responsive education are critical to student achievement and success in Native communities. NIEA submits the following recommendations to strengthen and expand federal resources and funding that support the preservation and revitalization of Native languages across the country.

- **Reauthorize the Esther Martinez Native American Language Preservation Act** – Passed in the Senate as S. 254, the Esther Martinez Native American Preservation Act reauthorizes 2006 legislation that funds language immersion and restoration programs for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. Funding provided under this Act has supported the development of tribal curricula, language assessments, and immersion programs to support and revive Native languages in schools across the country. Though this legislation passed the Senate on November 29, 2017, a House companion bill has remained in the House Committee on Education and the Workforce since February with little movement. NIEA recommends that congressional leaders work to pass this critical legislation before the November 6 elections.
- **Support Assessments in the Native Language of Instruction** – Assessments are critical to understanding students’ learning, growth and achievement. However, state and federal agencies have struggled to construct testing mechanisms that appropriately assess students in the Native language of instruction due to the number of unique Native languages and lack of technical expertise in state and federal agencies and outside of tribal communities. Tribes must have the flexibility to assess student learning and growth and ensure that Native students have access to excellent education opportunities. Consistent with the federal trust responsibility, deference on Native language assessments should be provided to tribes that operate Native immersion schools across the country.
- **Expand Pathways for Native Language Teacher Recruitment and Retention, including Native Teacher Preparation Programs** – Despite tribal innovation and development, schools and immersion programs continue to face an ongoing shortage of culturally responsive educators that are fluent in Native languages. Federal support to address teacher shortages in Native communities through legislation such as the Native Educator Support and Training Act (S. 458) is critical to ensuring that Native students have access to highly-qualified teachers. However, immersion schools and programs require educators with specialized knowledge and fluency in Native languages. Some tribal communities have addressed shortages by creating teacher training and professional development programs that recruit fluent language speakers or train educators to speak Native languages. In order to revitalize Native languages, tribes must be able to certify teachers to ensure that Native students in immersion schools have access to equitable opportunities.
- **Replicate and Expand Native Language Schools** – Schools that teach students through the medium of language immersion are critical to revitalizing Native languages for future generations. Through language immersion, Native students build academic and cognitive skills for future success in a positive learning environment where they can thrive. Due to limited funding and resources, some tribes and Native communities lack the resources to replicate and expand successful models for language immersion and revitalization. Tribes

and Native communities must have access to the tools necessary to exercise sovereignty in education through high-quality Native language schools and programs.

- **Increase Appropriations for Native Language Preservation and Revitalization** – Tribes must have access to the resources and funding necessary to exercise tribal sovereignty to support Native language immersion schools and provide Native students access to excellent culture-based education options. Federal grants through the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) and the Department of Education (Department), provide financial support for tribes to support Native students through language immersion. NIEA recommends that Congress increase appropriations for Native language preservation programs at ANA to \$14 million and National Activities, including Native language programs, at the Department to \$10 million in FY 2019.

CONCLUSION

Schools and programs that teach Native languages have the potential to ensure that Native students thrive. Tribes and tribal organizations must have access to the tools and resources to build and strengthen programs that revitalize Native languages for generations to come. NIEA looks forward to working with you to ensure equity in education for the only students that the federal government has a direct responsibility to educate – Native students.

Thank you for considering these comments for the record. If you have any questions, please contact Ahniwake Rose, NIEA Executive Director, at arose@niea.org.

Sincerely,



Dr. Jolene Bowman, President